

VOLUME ONE OF THE
RIYRIA CHRONICLES

THE CROWN TOWER



MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

THE LEGEND IS
JUST BEGINNING...



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THE RIYRIA CHRONICLES

The Crown Tower

The Rose and the Thorn

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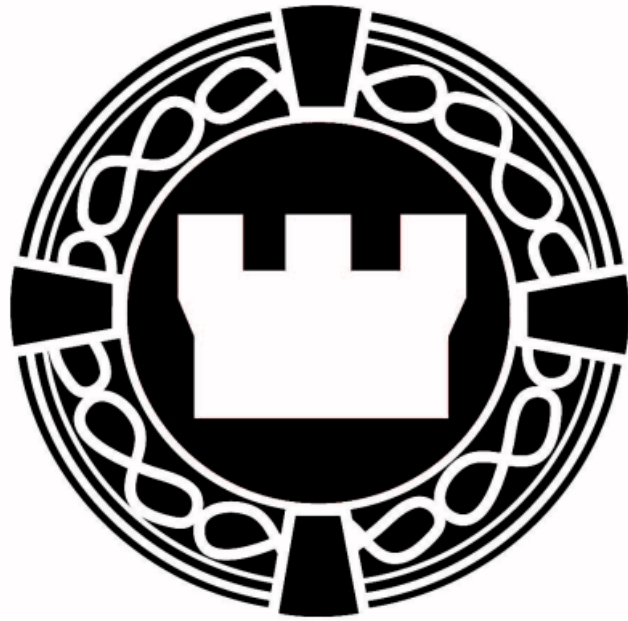
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THE CROWN TOWER



BOOK ONE OF THE RIYRIA CHRONICLES

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PICKLES

Hadrian Blackwater hadn't gone more than five steps off the ship before he was robbed.

The bag—his only bag—was torn from his hand. He never even saw the thief. Hadrian couldn't see much of anything in the lantern-lit chaos surrounding the pier, just a mass of faces, people shoving to get away from the gangway or get nearer to the ship. Used to the rhythms of a pitching deck, he struggled to keep his feet on the stationary dock amidst the jostling scramble. The newly arrived moved hesitantly, causing congestion. Many onshore searched for friends and relatives, yelling, jumping, waving arms—chasing the attention of someone. Others were more professional, holding torches and shouting offers for lodging and jobs. One bald man with a voice like a war trumpet stood on a crate, promising that The Black Cat Tavern offered the strongest ale at the cheapest prices. Twenty feet away, his competition balanced on a wobbly barrel and proclaimed the bald man a liar. He further insisted The Lucky Hat was the only local tavern that didn't substitute dog meat for mutton. Hadrian didn't care. He wanted to get out of the crowd and find the thief who stole his bag. After only a few minutes, he realized that wasn't going to happen. He settled for protecting his purse and considered himself lucky. At least nothing of value was lost—just clothing, but given how cold Avryn was in autumn, that might be a problem.

Hadrian followed the flow of bodies, not that he had much choice. Adrift in the strong current, he bobbed along with his head just above the surface. The dock creaked and moaned under the weight of escaping passengers who hurried away from what had been their cramped home for more than a month. Weeks breathing clean salt air had been replaced by the pungent smells of fish, smoke, and tar. Rising far above the dimly lit docks, the city's lights appeared as brighter points in a starlit world.

Hadrian followed four dark-skinned Calian men hauling crates packed with colorful birds, which squawked and rattled their cages. Behind him, walked a poorly dressed man and woman. The man carried *two* bags, one over a shoulder and the other tucked under an arm. Apparently no one was interested in *their* belongings. Hadrian realized he should have worn something else. His eastern attire was not only uselessly thin, but also in a land of leather and wool, the bleached white linen thawb and the gold-trimmed cloak screamed *wealth*.

"Here! Over here!" The barely distinguishable voice was one more sound in the maelstrom of shouts, wagon wheels, bells, and whistles. "This way. Yes, you, come. Come!"

Reaching the end of the ramp and clearing most of the congestion, Hadrian spotted an adolescent boy. Dressed in tattered clothes, he waited beneath the fiery glow of a swaying lantern. The wiry youth held Hadrian's bag and beamed an enormous smile. "Yes, yes, you there. Please come. Right over here," he called, waving with his free hand.

"That's my bag!" Hadrian shouted, struggling to reach him and stymied by the remaining crowd blocking the narrow pier.

"Yes! Yes!" The lad grinned wider, his eyes bright with enthusiasm. "You are very lucky I took it from you or someone would have surely stolen it."

"*You* stole it!"

“No. No. Not at all. I have been faithfully protecting your most valued property.” The youth straightened his willowy back such that Hadrian thought he might salute. “Someone like you should not be carrying your own bag.”

Hadrian squeezed around three women, who’d paused to comfort a crying child, only to be halted by an elderly man dragging an incredibly large trunk. The old guy, wraith thin with bright white hair, blocked the narrow isthmus already cluttered by the mountain of bags being recklessly thrown to the pier from the ship.

“What do you mean *someone like me*?” Hadrian shouted over the trunk as the old man struggled in front of him.

“You are a great knight, yes?”

“No, I’m not.”

The boy pointed at him. “You must be. Look how big you are, and you carry swords—three swords. And that one on your back is huge. Only a knight carries such things.”

Hadrian sighed when the old man’s trunk became wedged in the gap between the decking and the ramp. He reached down and lifted it free, receiving several vows of gratitude in an unfamiliar language.

“See,” the boy said, “only a knight would help a stranger in need like that.”

More bags crashed down on the pile beside him. One tumbled off, rolling into the harbor’s dark water with a *plunk!* Hadrian pressed forward, both to avoid being hit from above and to retrieve his stolen property. “I’m not a knight. Now, give me back my bag.”

“I will carry it for you. My name is Pickles, but we must be going. Quickly now.” The boy hugged Hadrian’s bag and trotted off on dirty bare feet.

“Hey!”

“Quickly, quickly! We should not linger here.”

“What’s the rush? What are you talking about? And come back here with my bag!”

“You are very lucky to have me. I am an excellent guide. Anything you want, I know where to look. With me you can get the best of everything and all for the least amounts.”

Hadrian finally caught up and grabbed his bag. He pulled and got the boy with it, his arms still tightly wrapped around the canvas.

“Ha! See?” The boy grinned. “No one is pulling your bag out of *my* hands!”

“Listen”—Hadrian took a moment to catch his breath—“I don’t need a guide. I’m not staying here.”

“Where are you going?”

“Up north. Way up north. A place called Sheridan.”

“Ah! The university.”

This surprised Hadrian. Pickles didn’t look like the worldly type. The kid resembled an abandoned dog. The kind that might have once worn a collar but now possessed only fleas, visible ribs, and an overdeveloped sense for survival.

“You are studying to be a scholar? I should have known. My apologies for any insult. You are most smart—so, of course, you will make a great scholar. You should not tip me for making such a mistake. But that is even better. I know just where we must go. There is a barge that travels up the Bernum River. Yes, the barge will be perfect and one leaves tonight. There will not be another for days, and you do not want to stay in an awful city like this. We will be in Sheridan in no time.”

“We?” Hadrian smirked.

“You will want me with you, yes? I am not just familiar with Vernes. I am an expert on all of Avryn—I have traveled far. I can help you, a steward who can see to your needs and watch your belongings to keep them safe from thieves while you study. A job I am most good at, yes?”

“I’m not a student, not going to be one either. Just visiting someone, and I don’t need a steward.”

“Of course you do not need a steward—if you are not going to be a scholar—but as the son of a noble lord just back from the east, you definitely need a houseboy, and I will make a fine houseboy. I will make sure your chamber pot is always emptied, your fire well stoked in winter, and fan you in the summer to keep the flies away.”

“Pickles,” Hadrian said firmly. “I’m not a lord’s son, and I don’t need a servant. I—” He stopped after noticing the boy’s attention had been drawn away, and his gleeful expression turned fearful. “What’s wrong?”

“I told you we needed to hurry. We need to get away from the dock right now!”

Hadrian turned to see men with clubs marching up the pier, their heavy feet causing the dock to bounce.

“Press gang,” Pickles said. “They are always near when ships come in. Newcomers like you can get caught and wake up in the belly of a ship already at sea. Oh no!” Pickles gasped as one spotted them.

After a quick whistle and shoulder tap, four men headed their way. Pickles flinched. The boy’s legs flexed, his weight shifting as if to bolt, but he looked at Hadrian, bit his lip, and didn’t move.

The clubmen charged but slowed and came to a stop after spotting Hadrian's swords. The four could have been brothers. Each had almost-beards, oily hair, sunbaked skin, and angry faces. The expression must have been popular, as it left permanent creases in their brows.

They studied him for a second, puzzled. Then the foremost thug, wearing a stained tunic with one torn sleeve, asked, "You a knight?"

"No, I'm not a knight." Hadrian rolled his eyes.

Another laughed and gave the one with the torn sleeve a rough shove. "Daft fool—he's not much older than the boy next to him."

"Don't bleedin' shove me on this slimy dock, ya stupid sod." The man looked back at Hadrian. "He's not that young."

"It's possible," one of the others said. "Kings do stupid things. Heard one knighted his dog once. Sir Spot they called him."

The four laughed. Hadrian was tempted to join in, but he was sobered by the terrified look on Pickles's face.

The one with the torn sleeve took a step closer. "He's got to be at least a squire. Look at all that steel, for Maribor's sake. Where's yer master, boy? He around?"

"I'm not a squire either," Hadrian replied.

"No? What's with all the steel, then?"

"None of your business."

The men laughed. "Oh, you're a tough one, are ya?"

They spread out, taking firmer holds on their sticks. One had a strap of leather run through a hole in the handle and wrapped around his wrist. *Probably figured that was a good idea*, Hadrian thought.

“You better leave us alone,” Pickles said, voice wavering. “Do you not know who this is?” He pointed at Hadrian. “He is a famous swordsman—a born killer.”

Laughter. “Is that so?” the nearest said, and paused to spit between yellow teeth.

“Oh yes!” Pickles insisted. “He’s vicious—an animal—and very touchy, very dangerous.”

“A young colt like him, eh?” The man gazed at Hadrian and pushed out his lips in judgment. “Big enough—I’ll grant ya that—but it looks to me like he still has his mother’s milk dripping down his chin.” He focused on Pickles. “And *you’re* no vicious killer, are ya, little lad? You’re the dirty alley rat I saw yesterday under the alehouse boardwalks trying to catch crumbs. You, my boy, are about to embark on a new career at sea. Best thing for ya really. You’ll get food and learn to work—work real hard. It’ll make a man out of ya.”

Pickles tried to dodge, but the thug grabbed him by the hair.

“Let him go,” Hadrian said.

“How did ya put it?” The guy holding Pickles chuckled. “*None of your business?*”

“He’s my squire,” Hadrian declared.

The men laughed again. “You said you ain’t a knight, remember?”

“He works for me—that’s good enough.”

“No it ain’t, ’cause this one works for the maritime industry now.” He threw a muscled arm around Pickles’s neck and bent the boy over as another moved behind with a length of rope pulled from his belt.

“I said, let him go.” Hadrian raised his voice.

“Hey!” the man with the torn sleeve barked. “Don’t give us no orders, boy. We ain’t taking you, ’cause you’re somebody’s property, someone who has you hauling three swords, someone who might miss you. That’s problems we don’t need, see? But don’t push it. Push it and we’ll

break bones. Push us more and we'll drop you in a boat anyway. Push us too far, and you won't even get a boat."

"I really hate people like you," Hadrian said, shaking his head. "I just got here. I was at sea for a month—*a month!* That's how long I've traveled to get away from this kind of thing." He shook his head in disgust. "And here you are—you too." Hadrian pointed at Pickles as they worked at tying the boy's wrists behind his back. "I didn't ask for your help. I didn't ask for a guide, or a steward, or a houseboy. I was just fine on my own. But no, you had to take my bag and be so good-humored about everything. Worst of all, you didn't run. Maybe you're stupid—I don't know. But I can't help thinking you stuck around to help me."

"I'm sorry I didn't do a better job." Pickles looked up at him with sad eyes.

Hadrian sighed. "Damn it. There you go again." He looked back at the clubmen, already knowing how it would turn out—how it always turned out—but he had to try anyway. "Look, I'm not a knight. I'm not a squire either, but these swords are mine, and while Pickles thought he was bluffing, I—"

"Oh just shut up." The one with the torn sleeve took a step and thrust his club to shove Hadrian. On the slippery pier it was easy for Hadrian to put him off balance. He caught the man's arm, twisted the wrist and elbow around, and snapped the bone. The crack sounded like a walnut opening. He gave the screaming clubman a shove, which was followed by a splash as he went into the harbor.

Hadrian could have drawn his swords then—almost did out of reflex—but he'd promised himself things would be different. Besides, he stole the man's club before sending him over the side, a solid bit of hickory about an inch in diameter and a little longer than a foot. The grip had

been polished smooth from years of use, the other end stained brown from blood that seeped into the wood grain.

The remaining men gave up trying to tie Pickles, but one continued to hold him in a headlock while the other two rushed Hadrian. He read their feet, noting their weight and momentum. Dodging his first attacker's swing, Hadrian tripped the second and struck him in the back of the head as he went down. The sound of club on skull made a hollow thud like slapping a pumpkin, and when the guy hit the deck, he stayed there. The other swung at him again. Hadrian parried with the hickory stick, striking the man's fingers. The man cried out and lost his grip, the club left dangling from the leather strap around his wrist. Hadrian grabbed the weapon, twisted it tight, bent the man's arm back, and pulled hard. The bone didn't break, but the shoulder popped. The man's quivering legs signaled the fight had left him, and Hadrian sent him over the side to join his friend.

By the time Hadrian turned to face the last of the four, Pickles was standing alone and rubbing his neck. His would-be captor sprinted into the distance.

"Is he going to come back with friends, you think?" Hadrian asked.

Pickles didn't say anything. He just stared at Hadrian, his mouth open.

"No sense lingering to find out, I suppose," Hadrian answered himself. "So where's this barge you were talking about?"



Away from the seaside pier, the city of Vernes was still choked and stifling. Narrow brick roads formed a maze overshadowed by balconies that nearly touched. Lanterns and moonlight were equally scarce, and down some lonely pathways there was no light at all. Hadrian was thankful to have Pickles. Recovered from his fright, the "alley rat" acted more like a hunting dog.

He trotted through the city's corridors, leaping puddles that stank of waste and ducking wash lines and scaffolding with practiced ease.

“That's the living quarters for most of the shipwrights, and over there is the dormitory for the dockworkers.” Pickles pointed to a grim building near the wharf with three stories, one door, and few windows. “Most of the men around this ward live there or at the sister building on the south end. So much here is shipping. Now, up there, high on that hill—see it? That is the citadel.”

Hadrian lifted his head and made out the dark silhouette of a fortress illuminated by torches.

“Not really a castle, more like a counting house for traders and merchants. Walls have to be high and thick for all the gold they stuff up there. This is where all the money from the sea goes. Everything else runs downhill—but gold flows up.”

Pickles sidestepped a toppled bucket and spooked a pair of cat-sized rats that ran for deeper shadows. In the vast network of darkness, finding them was easy. Halfway past a doorway Hadrian realized a pile of discarded rags was actually an ancient-looking man seated on a stoop. With a frazzled gray beard and a face thick with folds, he never moved, not even to blink. Hadrian only noticed him after his smoking pipe's bowl glowed bright orange.

“It is a filthy city,” Pickles called back to him. “I am pleased we are leaving. Too many foreigners here—too many easterners—many probably arrived with you. Strange folk, the Calians. Their women practice witchcraft and tell fortunes, but I say it is best not to know too much about one's future. We will not have to worry about such things in the north. In Warric, they burn witches in the winter to keep warm. At least that is what I have heard.” Pickles stopped abruptly and spun. “What is your name?”

“Finally decided to ask, eh?” Hadrian chuckled.

“I will need to know if I am going to book you passage.”

“I can take care of that myself. Assuming, of course, you are actually taking me to a barge and not just to some dark corner where you’ll clunk me on the head and do a more thorough job of robbing me.”

Pickles looked hurt. “I would do no such thing. Do you think me such a fool? First, I have seen what you do to people who try to *clunk you on the head*. Second, we have already passed a dozen perfectly dark corners.” Pickles beamed his big smile, which Hadrian took to be one part mischief, one part pride, and two parts just-plain-happy-to-be-alive joy. He couldn’t argue with that. He also couldn’t remember the last time he felt the way Pickles looked.

The press gang leader was right. Pickles could only be four or five years younger than Hadrian. *Five*, he thought. *He’s five years younger than I am. He’s me before I left. Did I smile like that back then?* He wondered how long Pickles had been on his own and if he’d still have that smile in five years.

“Hadrian, Hadrian Blackwater.” He extended his hand.

The boy nodded. “A good name. Very good. Better than Pickles—but then what is not?”

“Did your mother name you that?”

“Oh, most certainly. Rumor has it I was both conceived and born on the same crate of pickles. How can one deny such a legend? Even if it isn’t true, I think it should be.”

Crawling out of the labyrinth, they emerged onto a wider avenue. They had gained height, and Hadrian could see the pier and the masts of the ship he arrived on below. A good-sized crowd was still gathered—people looking for a place to stay or searching for belongings. Hadrian remembered the bag that had rolled into the harbor. How many others would find themselves stranded in a new city with little to nothing?

The bark of a dog caused Hadrian to turn. Looking down the narrow street, he thought he caught movement but couldn't be sure. The twisted length of the alley had but one lantern. Moonlight illuminated the rest, casting patches of blue-gray. A square here, a rectangle there, not nearly enough to see by and barely enough to judge distance. Had it been another rat? Seemed bigger. He waited, staring. Nothing moved.

When he looked back, Pickles had crossed most of the plaza to the far side where, to Hadrian's delight, there was another dock. This one sat on the mouth of the great Bernum River, which in the night appeared as a wide expanse of darkness. He cast one last look backward toward the narrow streets. Still nothing moved. *Ghosts*. That's all—his past stalking him.

Hadrian reeked of death. It wasn't the sort of stench others could smell or that water could wash, but it lingered on him like sweat-saturated pores after a long night of drinking. Only this odor didn't come from alcohol; it came from blood. Not from drinking it—although Hadrian knew some who had. His stink came from wallowing in it. But all that was over now, or so he told himself with the certainty of the recently sober. That had been a different Hadrian, a younger version who he'd left on the other side of the world and who he was still running from.

Realizing Pickles still had his bag, Hadrian ran to close the distance. Before he caught up, Pickles was in trouble again.

"It is his!" Pickles cried, pointing at Hadrian. "I was helping him reach the barge before it left."

The boy was surrounded by six soldiers. Most wore chain and held square shields. The one in the middle, with a fancy plume on his helmet, wore layered plate on his shoulders and chest as well as a studded leather skirt. He was the one Pickles was speaking to while two others restrained the boy. They all looked over as Hadrian approached.

“This your bag?” the officer asked.

“It is, and he’s telling the truth.” Hadrian pointed. “He is escorting me to that barge over there.”

“In a hurry to leave our fair city, are you?” The officer’s tone was suspicious, and his eyes scanned Hadrian as he talked.

“No offense to Vernes, but yes. I have business up north.”

The officer moved a step closer. “What’s your name?”

“Hadrian Blackwater.”

“Where you from?”

“Hintindar originally.”

“Originally?” The skepticism in his voice rose along with his eyebrows.

Hadrian nodded. “I’ve been in Calis for several years. Just returned from Dagastan on that ship down there.”

The officer glanced at the dock, then at Hadrian’s knee-length thawb, loose cotton pants, and keffiyeh headdress. He leaned in, sniffed, and grimaced. “You’ve definitely been on a ship, and that outfit is certainly Calian.” He sighed, then turned to Pickles. “But this one hasn’t been on any ship. He says he’s going with you. Is that right?”

Hadrian glanced at Pickles and saw the hope in the boy’s eyes. “Yeah. I’ve hired him to be my...ah...my...servant.”

“Whose idea was that? His or yours?”

“His, but he’s been very helpful. I wouldn’t have found this barge without him.”

“You just got off one ship,” the officer said. “Seems odd you’re so eager to get on another.”

“Well actually, I’m not, but Pickles says the barge is about to leave and there won’t be another for days. Is that true?”

“Yes,” the officer said, “and awfully convenient too.”

“Can I ask what the problem is? Is there a law against hiring a guide and paying for him to travel with you?”

“No, but we’ve had some nasty business here in town—real nasty business. So naturally we’re interested in anyone eager to leave, at least anyone who’s been around during the last few days.” He looked squarely at Pickles.

“I haven’t done anything,” Pickles said.

“So you say, but even if you haven’t, maybe you know something about it. Either way you might feel the need to disappear, and latching on to someone above suspicion would be a good way to get clear of trouble, wouldn’t it?”

“But I don’t know anything about the killings.”

The officer turned to Hadrian. “You’re free to go your way, and you’d best be quick. They’ve already called for boarders.”

“What about Pickles?”

He shook his head. “I can’t let him go with you. Unlikely he’s guilty of murder, but he might know who is. Street orphans see a lot that they don’t like to talk about if they think they can avoid it.”

“But I’m telling you, I don’t know *anything*. I haven’t even been on the hill.”

“Then you’ve nothing to worry about.”

“But—” Pickles looked as if he might cry. “He was going to take me out of here. We were going to go north. We were going to go to a university.”

“Hoy! Hoy! Last call for passengers! Barge to Colnora! Last call!” a voice bellowed.

“Listen”—Hadrian opened his purse—“you did me a service, and that’s worth payment. Now, after you finish with their questions, if you still want to work for me, you can use this money to meet me in Sheridan. Catch the next barge or buckboard north, whatever. I’ll be there for a month maybe, a couple of weeks at least.” Hadrian pressed a coin into the boy’s hand. “If you come, ask for Professor Arcadius. He’s the one I’m meeting with, and he should be able to tell you how to find me. Okay?”

Pickles nodded and looked a bit better. Glancing down at the coin, his eyes widened, and the old giant smile of his returned. “Yes, sir! I will be there straightaway. You can most certainly count on me. Now you must run before the barge leaves.”

Hadrian gave him a nod, picked up his bag, and jogged to the dock where a man waited at the gangway of a long flat boat.